

Saint Bernadette



The Facts Behind The Story

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By

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“... **Your life begins, Bernadette.**” So ends the story of the earthly life of that little girl whose revelations astonished the world. Today, many years after, millions thrill to the sweet song she made, unconsciously, for all the world to hear—a song of innocence, humility, and love—made not for bodily ears, but for the ears of the soul.

She learned that song from the lovely lady that she saw in the grotto of Massabielle, whose words she might well make her own: “My soul doth magnify the Lord . . . for He hath looked upon the lowliness of His handmaid . . . and He that is mighty hath done great things to me.” For in a lesser way God had done great things to her, too. She was lowly, poor, and unlearned, but she was chosen to be a messenger from Heaven.

On February 11, 1858, Bernadette Soubirous, child of poor parents in the town of Lourdes, in Southern France, went with two other children to gather firewood by the banks of the River Gave. She was fourteen years of age, an innocent and gentle girl, rather dull at her lessons. The day was bitterly cold, so when the other two girls took off their shoes and crossed a small stream, she waited behind, because she suffered from asthma.

However, when the others had gone further on to collect sticks, Bernadette decided to follow them. She had taken off one of her stockings when she heard the sound of a strong wind, but could see nothing. Just across the stream in the side of the hill there was a large cave, or grotto, with a kind of niche or opening high up at the back. Let Bernadette herself tell the story of what next happened:

WHAT HAPPENED TO BERNADETTE?

“I turned towards the meadow and I saw that the trees were not moving at all. I had half noticed, but without attending to it, that some branches were waving somewhere near the grotto. I went on taking my shoes off, and I was putting one foot into the water, when I heard the same sound in front of me. I lifted my eyes and I saw a mass of branches and brambles tossed and waving this way and that under the higher opening in the grotto, though nothing stirred all round. Behind these branches, in the opening, I saw immediately afterwards, a white girl, not bigger than I, who made me a little bow with her head. At the same time she put her hands out a little from beside her body—her arms were hanging down like the (pictures of) our Lady. A rosary was hanging on her right arm.

“I was frightened. I stepped back. I wanted to call the two little ones, but I dared not. I rubbed my eyes again and again. I thought I must be mistaken. Looking up, I saw the girl smiling at me very sweetly. She seemed to be inviting me to approach, but I still was frightened. All the same, it was not a fear like what I have felt at other times, because I

would always have stayed to look at that, but when one is frightened one goes away quick. Then I thought of saying my prayers. I put my hand in my pocket and took out the rosary that I always carry in it; I knelt down and meant to make the Sign of the Cross, but I could not put my hand to my forehead—it fell back. Meanwhile, the girl put herself sideways and turned towards me; this time she was holding the big rosary in her hand. She crossed herself, as though to pray. My hand was trembling; I tried again to make the Sign of the Cross, and this time I could. After this, I was no more frightened. I said my rosary. The girl made the beads of hers slip (through her fingers), but she did not move her lips.

“While saying my rosary, I was looking as hard as I could. It was wearing a white dress, hanging down to the feet, of which only the tips appeared. The dress was fastened quite high up, round the neck, by a fold from which a white cord was hanging. A white veil, covering the head, went down over the shoulders almost to the hem of the dress. On each foot I saw a yellow rose.

The sash of the dress was blue, with its ends hanging down to her feet. The chain of the rosary was yellow; the beads, white, large and widely separated. The girl was alive, very young and surrounded with light. When I had finished my rosary, she bowed to me, smiling, retired into the niche, and disappeared all of a sudden.”

ECSTASY

Bernadette was examined and reexamined regarding the details of what she saw, but she never altered or added anything to the description. What, then, is the explanation of this strange story? Imagination? That’s what her parents said. That’s what the civil authorities and the clergy said. However, events proved otherwise.

In spite of all kinds of hindrances, she returned to the grotto about eighteen times during the following days. Each time she returned, her “beautiful girl” appeared again. When the vision appeared, Bernadette’s face became transfigured with ecstasy. It shone with a heavenly radiance so that her mother hardly recognized her. “Tears were running from her eyes,” said a man who saw her on the second occasion. “She was smiling, and her face was beautiful—more beautiful than anything I have ever seen.” At times, she was completely lost to everything else in the world, even when surrounded by thousands of people.

Was this hallucination? Not one of the symptoms of hallucination was present. A doctor observed her pulse and breathing during the ecstasy and found them both to be normal. She was perfectly calm. After the visions, she acted in a quite normal way. She was not seeking publicity, for she took no notice of the crowds and she tried to avoid the

questioners who pestered her. She never spoke of the vision unless compelled to by inquirers. People were struck by the charming grace of her gestures and the transparent faith and devotion she displayed when she made the Sign of the Cross so beautifully in imitation of her lady.

THE MIRACULOUS SPRING

On February 25, there was an entirely new development. Bernadette was seen to move about the grotto and then to scratch in the ground with her hands. She said afterwards that the lady told her to drink of the spring and to wash in it. She could see no spring. Yet, the lady pointed to this place and, when Bernadette began to dig, she found a little muddy water. She drank some and rubbed it on her face. The people thought she was mad and the scoffers began to laugh—the whole thing had become a joke.

However, that afternoon, the joke became very serious when it was discovered that a stream of clear water was flowing from the muddy hole. Very soon, the spring was pouring forth 27,000 gallons per day, and it has continued to do so until the present time.

Soon after this, Bernadette went to M. Peyramale, the Dean of Lourdes, with a message from her lady. She had been told to go to the priests and to tell them that a chapel should be built at the grotto. The lady had also said, “Let processions come hither.” The priest replied, “Have you any money to build a chapel?” “No,” she said. “Neither have I. Ask the lady for some.” The priests gave her no encouragement. None of them had been to the grotto. It is Church policy not to recognize alleged visions or miracles until there is overwhelming proof that they are genuine.

It was not long before such proof was forthcoming, but it was only after several years that a commission of enquiry set up by the bishop finally pronounced that the happenings at Massabielle could be accepted as supernatural.

Things began to happen, however, that made it more and more difficult to be an unbeliever. A child who had been paralyzed from birth lay dying. The doctor said there was no hope, but the mother, in desperation, carried her baby to the grotto and bathed him in the ice-cold water of the spring. Immediately the child became well; he was completely cured. Fifty years afterwards, he was to be seen at Lourdes, as a man helping to carry the sick.

These are the facts, briefly outlined, upon which the noted author, Franz Werfel, based his story, *“The Song of Bernadette.”* In 1940, France was overrun by the armies of Hitler. Fleeing from the Nazi persecution, Franz Werfel (not a Catholic, but a Jew) found himself in Lourdes, with little chance of escape. He expected any day to find himself a

prisoner, and condemned to death. Yet, the days dragged on, and the Nazis did not come. Franz Werfel was not idle during this time. He took the opportunity to make a study of the famous shrine of the Blessed Virgin and its history. Further, he made a vow that, if he should escape to America, he would write a book to tell the story of the little girl whose name was already famous throughout the world.

HOLLYWOOD AND LOURDES

And so “*The Song of Bernadette*” was written, and the world acclaimed it as a best-seller. Then Hollywood was not slow to see in this beautiful story the material for an outstanding film. We are not accustomed to associate spirituality with Hollywood, but there can be no doubt that this film is a rare achievement. As someone said to me after seeing the picture, “You are impressed not so much by what you see as by what you do not see.” For, a depth of truth and beauty is in it, a depth that must appeal to all except the most material-minded.

There are some, I know, who think the story is too good to be true—such things just do not happen in these days, they say. However, history and science are against them, for there is overwhelming evidence that the story is true.

In the film, certain historical details were altered somewhat for the sake of dramatic effect, but not the main facts of the story. It might be good to point out here one or two items in the film that are not historically accurate. It is not true, for instance, that Bernadette was persuaded to enter the convent. It was her own desire entirely. She was sent to board with the Sisters to finish her schooling and to escape the endless crowd of inquirers who wanted to cross-examine her. Some years later, she asked to be admitted as a Sister into the convent and was sent to Nevers, where she afterwards spent most of her time looking after the sick.

Another point worth mentioning is this: It is true that Bernadette suffered from the severity of her Novice Mistress, Sister Marie Vazous, who seems to have failed to understand the precious soul committed to her charge. Possibly, for dramatic effect the severe side of Sister Vazous’ character is considerably exaggerated in the film. Allowance should be made for this. Otherwise, the character may give a false impression to those not otherwise acquainted with convent life.

THE END OF THE SONG?

Yet, despite such minor defects, *"The Song of Bernadette"* tells a truthful story very beautifully. The lady had said to Bernadette, "I do not promise to make you happy in this world, but only in the next." So, quite rightly, the story ends on a note of triumph,

" . . . Your life begins, Bernadette."

That was the last note to be heard on earth, then, of the sweet song of the little peasant girl of Lourdes. Or was it? If it were, then did the whole world take up the chorus? For her story was told in many lands, and the grotto of Massabielle became a focal point of devotion, first for hundreds, then for thousands, and finally for millions. Streams of pilgrims came from near and far. A large church was built near the grotto, and then a second and third, one above the other. Far from being forgotten, Lourdes has become more and more famous. The number of pilgrims before the war had reached over a million per year. Many of those who go are sick and some are dying—all hoping to benefit, bodily or spiritually, from the divine gifts that are dispensed there.

Why should this be so? Why is there so much enthusiasm? What proof is there that an extraordinary power is at work there?

Indeed, what proof have we that the whole story of Bernadette and her lovely lady is anything more than a pious legend—very beautiful and poetic, no doubt, but the product of a child's imagination? This is the twentieth century. Science should have something to say about such alleged wonders.

THE VERDICT OF SCIENCE

Yes, science does have something to say about the wonders at Massabielle. And, it is twentieth-century science that gives us the answer.

On one side of the large square before the basilica at Lourdes, there is an office called the "Bureau des Constatations." Within that office, there meets a committee of doctors. Any qualified medical practitioner from any part of the world, be he atheist, Jew, Protestant, or Catholic, may sit on that committee. In fact, large numbers of doctors come there to take part in the deliberations of the committee—**and many of them are unbelievers.**

This bureau exists for a reason, for wonderful things take place at Lourdes—things well worthy of scientific investigation. Yes, the sick are cured. Not all the sick that go there are cured, but over 4000 cures have been recorded. Other cures have occurred, which have not been investigated.

Is this is faith healing, perhaps? Religious excitement? Auto-suggestion? The power of the mind over the body? Yes, faith healing can work wonders—of a sort. In the right circumstances, it can cure, at least temporarily, many ailments due to nervous disorders. So-called “faith-healers” and psychologists both make use of this power of the mind over the body.

MEDICAL EVIDENCE

However, the cases investigated by the bureau at Lourdes are not cures of nervous disorders. They are cures of organic disease. “Faith-healing” has never cured a man in the last stages of cancer—much less, cured him in one day. Auto-suggestion has never caused a tuberculosis patient, spitting blood and dying, to jump from his bed, never again to suffer from any traces of the disease. Broken limbs are not set overnight by the power of the mind over the body—especially when a large section of the bone has been removed.

All these things, and many more equally wonderful, have happened at Lourdes. The bureau immediately rejects any cure that might possibly be explained by suggestion, or any other natural cause. It examines only alleged cures of organic disease. Then it demands the most complete medical evidence, which includes doctors’ diagnoses, x-rays, photographs, and a full history of the case. If, after a thorough examination of the patient’s present condition, it is found that a cure has taken place and, if after a considerable period of time, that cure is found to be permanent, the bureau will pronounce that medical science can give no explanation for the cure.

Anyone is free to go to Lourdes and study the medical files of the various cases. Men of science go there in large numbers, many of them having no belief in the supernatural. These men of science go out of curiosity or they go to scoff. Yet, they come away either converted or baffled. Not a single one of them has ever found a natural explanation for what goes on there.

In the beginning, it was thought that the water of the spring might have some curative properties, but chemical analysis showed it to be nothing but ordinary drinking water. Anyhow, nowadays many cures take place apart from the use of the spring water.

THE CASE OF JOHN TRAYNOR

By way of an example, it may be of interest to provide some details of one of the cases recorded at the Medical Bureau. I choose the case of John Traynor.

John Traynor was a Liverpool man. In 1914, when the first World War broke out, he was mobilized with the Royal Naval Reserve, to which he belonged. On April 25, 1915, he took part in the landing at Gallipoli. He was in charge of the first boat to leave the ship, and was one of the few to reach the shore that day. He seems to have been literally sprayed with bullets. Medical corpsmen brought him back, dazed and suffering, to the beach. A well-known English surgeon operated on him in Alexandria, in an attempt to sew together the severed nerves in the upper arm, which had been left paralyzed and useless by a bullet. The attempt failed, and so did a second.

John then suffered frequently from epilepsy. In April 1920, a doctor realized that the epilepsy was probably the result of the head wounds, and operated on John's skull. However, John's condition was no better after the operation. John had seizures as often as three times a day. Both legs were partly paralyzed, and nearly every organ in his body was impaired.

Somebody arranged to have him admitted to the "Mossley Hill Hospital for Incurables" on July 24, 1923. He never went there. By that date, he was in Lourdes instead.

“YOU'LL DIE ON THE WAY”

A pilgrimage to Lourdes was being organized from Liverpool. John decided he was going, and managed to scrape together the few pounds necessary. He discovered that his doctor would not give him a medical certificate to travel. He tried several other doctors. They all refused. "You cannot make the trip," said one of his priests. "You will die on the way, and bring trouble and grief to everybody."

John was a determined man, however, and he went to Lourdes all the same. Three times, they tried to take him off the train in France to bring him to a hospital, as he seemed to be dying. Each time there was no hospital where they stopped, and the only thing to do was to go on again with the patient on board. Thus, he arrived at Lourdes.

On the morning of the second day at Lourdes, John was being wheeled to the baths when he had an especially bad epileptic seizure. Blood flowed from his mouth, and the doctors were much alarmed. As he came to, he heard them saying, "Better take him back at once to the 'Aisle'" (the place where the sick were cared for). "No, you won't," he protested. "I've come to be bathed, and I'm not going back." "You'll die in the bath," they said. "If I do, I'll die in a good place."

CERTIFIED INCURABLE

So, John Traynor was lifted into the bath—a physical wreck, covered with sores, a dying cripple. The signed statements of Doctor Azurdia, Doctor Finn, and Doctor Harley testify that John was suffering from:

- (1) Epilepsy;
- (2) paralysis of the radial, median, and ulnar nerves of the right arm;
- (3) atrophy of the shoulder and pectoral muscles;
- (4) a trephine opening in the right parietal region of the skull (in this 1-inch opening there was a metal plate for protection);
- (5) absence of voluntary movement and loss of feeling in the legs; and
- (6) lack of bodily control.

John was placed in the bath a second time, and then was taken to be blessed during the procession of the Blessed Sacrament in the great square in front of the church. Just as the Sacred Host had passed by, John's right arm, which had been dead since 1915, was violently agitated. He burst the bandages and blessed himself—for the first time in years. A strange feeling came into his legs. The stretcher-bearers thought he was having another bad turn. He was given an injection to keep him quiet and taken back to bed.

FROM CRIPPLE TO COAL MAN

That was in the afternoon. Early the next morning, John heard the bells ringing out the Lourdes hymn, and jumped out of bed. He fell on his knees to finish the rosary he had been saying. He then ran out of the ward, pushed two assistants out of the way, and, in his pajamas, ran barefoot a distance of some two or three hundred yards, over the rough gravel, to the Grotto. John Traynor was cured.

“All I knew, he said afterwards, “was that I should thank the Blessed Virgin, and the Grotto was the place to do it. My mother had taught me that when you ask a favor from Our Lady, or wish to show her some special veneration, you should make a sacrifice. I had no money to offer, as I had spent my last few shillings on rosaries and medals for my wife and children. Yet, kneeling there before the Blessed Mother, I made the only sacrifice I could think of. I resolved to give up cigarettes.”

Soon after, and at any time for the next twenty years, you could have seen in Liverpool a hefty 16-stone man in the coal and haulage business, lifting 200-pound sacks of coal, who was officially classified as permanently incapacitated and 100-percent disabled.

That man was John Traynor. He died in 1943 from a hernia, a complaint in no way related to the illness and wounds of which he was cured in Lourdes.

Another group of experts testified to the miracle though unconsciously. Earlier, the British War Pensions Ministry, after extensive investigations into the severity of John's disabilities, awarded him a full disability pension for life. The ministry was so certain of John's disabilities, that they never revoked their original decision.

If the enemies of religion could find a natural explanation for such a case as this, they would certainly do so. But they have failed. Lourdes is an unanswerable challenge to modern belief. You cannot argue against Lourdes. You cannot use the weapon of science. You can only close your eyes to the facts, or else—believe.

ZOLA WRITES FICTION

Some people, of course, say, "miracles cannot happen, therefore they do not happen." No amount of evidence would convince people with such an unscientific approach to the question. **There are none so blind as those who will not see.** Such a man was Emile Zola, the French novelist, who went to Lourdes and afterwards wrote a novel on what he saw there. He actually witnessed two unmistakable cures. Marie Lebranchu (called "La Grivotte" by Zola in his novel) had tuberculosis in a very advanced stage, and Zola saw her coughing up blood on the train going to Lourdes. The next day, she was completely cured. In his novel, Zola tells the story, but attributes her improvement to nervous excitement, and makes her collapse and die on the way home. In truth, she did not collapse and never had a recurrence of the disease.

Zola knew this and, when a doctor afterwards asked him why he had made the story conclude in a way that was opposed to actual facts, he replied in a tone of annoyance, "I suppose I am master of the persons in my own books, and can let them live or die as I choose." "Besides," he added, "I don't believe in miracles. Even if all the sick in Lourdes were cured in one moment, I would not believe in them!" That reminds you of the Gospel words, "Neither will they believe if one should rise from the dead."

At any rate, Zola's answer is the best that modern materialism can give. It shows what prejudice will do to a person's judgment in the face of irrefutable facts. And there are no secrets about Lourdes—no skeleton in the cupboard. Anyone is free to go there and study the evidence and see for himself.

MIRACLES OF GRACE

But let us not get things out of proportion. The miraculous cures at the Blessed Virgin's shrine are only a small part of the story of Lourdes, because something far more important goes on there all the time. Anyone who goes there, as I have done, will realize that. Yes, the Grotto of Massabielle is a focal point of intense prayer. If you want to see living faith—not faith smothered by convention or political correctness—transparent faith, unmistakably sincere, then go with a pilgrimage to Lourdes.

Listen to the murmuring torrent of the Rosary, many languages together in a mighty unison, as thousands of pilgrims march in procession carrying lighted candles. Remember the message Bernadette brought to the priest, “And the lady said, ‘Let processions come hither.’”

Or, kneel in the great square before the church as Christ in the Sacred Host is carried round for the blessing of the sick. There they lie, helpless on their stretchers or sitting in wheel chairs, in long rows. Behind them kneel their relatives and friends and the thousands of pilgrims. How like those days in Galilee, when they brought out their sick, blind, and crippled so the Savior might touch them!

THIS IS NEAR HEAVEN

Then a voice rings out—the voice of a priest leading the prayers, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us!” And then, “Lord, we adore Thee!” Around the square the echo rolls from all those voices, “Lord, we adore Thee!” “Lord, we hope in Thee!” And the answer comes, “Lord, we hope in Thee!” “Lord, we love Thee!” He who does not pray at Lourdes is indeed hard of heart.

Then, as the Blessed Sacrament approaches, you hear the invocations:

“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!”

“Thou art my Lord and my God!”

“Thou art the Resurrection and the Life!”

Repeatedly, the voices rise in response, “Thou art the Resurrection and the Life!” Yes, and Lourdes is indeed a place of resurrection and life. A place of resurrection and life because the sick and the suffering go away from there with new hope, new courage, new resignation, and new peace. There are also conversions at Lourdes—conversions of sinners and conversions of unbelievers. Once during her visions, after prostrating herself

on the ground, Bernadette stood and, turning to the people, cried out three times the word “Repentance!” How many countless souls have been brought to repentance here at the feet of the Blessed Virgin!

Therefore, the Mother of God leads us to her Divine Son and to His Church. In her long history, that Church has never lacked the testimony of miracles in her difficult task of convincing mankind of her divine mission to teach and sanctify all men. The Divine seal of miracles is the simplest and surest guide for the seeker after the true religion. The facts are obvious and beyond dispute. The only explanation is the direct intervention of God, Who cannot deceive His children. Thus, the testimony of Lourdes to the truth of the Catholic Church is its real significance for modern man.

And, it all began with that gentle little girl, so “stupid,” so favored, who went gathering firewood by the Gave at Massabielle. These are the facts behind the story that has captivated the world.

DEATHBED OF A SAINT

The life of Bernadette is a perfect example of how God makes use of the humblest of instruments to do His work. “For the weak things of the world hath God chosen that He may confound the strong.” Bernadette’s life was one of humility, charity, suffering, and love of God. As she lived, so did she die. Here is an account of her death:

“At that hour, as increasingly throughout her illness, it was noticed how alive her eyes were. Their limpid depth had often been spoken of; they must have been wonderful, and especially in her face, that was so ‘peasant’ in its purity. She answered all the prayers for the dying, and then, an hour before her departure, raising her eyes, cried three times, ‘Oh!’ in a voice, they said, of surprise rather than of pain. Her body trembled throughout; she put her hand on her heart, and said, with clear accentuation, ‘My God, I love Thee with all my heart, with all my soul, and with all my strength.’ She then took the crucifix into her own hands and kissed it, and begged pardon once more for all the trouble she had given. Then she said she was thirsty; she made, for the last time, her ‘marvelous sign of the Cross,’ and drank a few drops. Then she said gently, ‘Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for me, a poor sinner, a poor sinner,’ and died very quietly during this last prayer.”

“... Your life begins, Bernadette.”

In 1933, Bernadette was declared a saint by the highest authority in the Church.

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